

EPA-PNL-1779

Phil North/R10/USEPA/US

01/31/2011 02:52 PM

To Richard Parkin, Patricia McGrath, Michael Szerlog, Cara Steiner-Riley

cc

bcc

Subject Fairbanks News-Miner Editorial FYI

Fairbanks News Miner

Unnecessary fear: Experience shows mining, fishing can be compatible

Jan 30, 2011 | 574 views | 13  | 8  |  | 

News-Miner editorial

A survey released last week indicated a slight majority of Alaskans oppose development of Pebble Mine. Some might quibble about the questions asked in the survey, but it's hard to deny that the mine developers have a challenge before them.

The survey, by the reputable firm of Hellenthal and Associates, estimated 51.2 percent of Alaska's registered voters oppose the mine, while only 37.4 percent support it.

That's a significant gap in public opinion, one that would be hard to conjure solely through flawed survey methods.

It's a gap that also is undeserved, given the facts to date.

Here's the fundamental perception driving the opposition to the mine: The survey found "60.2 percent believe Alaskans cannot trust the mining industry when they say the Pebble Mine and salmon fishing in Bristol Bay can co-exist."

This is an unfortunate perception, given what's known about the proposed mine and numerous examples of such co-existence elsewhere.

To assert that a modern mine would destroy Bristol Bay's salmon runs requires great imagination. The mine would straddle the headwaters of just two small waterways — Upper Talarik Creek and the Koktuli River.

Of course, these tributaries feed larger river systems. The Talarik flows into Lake Iliamna, which itself is drained by the Kvichak River. The Koktuli feeds into the Mulchatna and subsequently the Nushagak rivers. The Kvichak and Nushagak are two of Bristol Bay's primary salmon migration rivers.

But a well-run mine will affect neither the tributaries nor the major rivers.

Look at other, large-scale operations in Alaska as examples.

Fort Knox Mine, in the upper Little Chena River drainage just outside Fairbanks, operates year after year with no harm to the salmon runs in the Chena River, which are significant contributors to the Yukon River system.

Pogo Mine north of Delta Junction does the same on the Goodpaster River, also an important salmon-spawning tributary of the Yukon.

The vast Red Dog Mine, on the upper tributaries of the Wulik River in northwest Alaska, literally has fish struggling to get closer.

In fact, after Red Dog's operators cleaned up naturally occurring toxins in a nearby creek, grayling sought to recolonize it.

There is no reason to believe Pebble would be any less well-managed than Alaska's other major mines.

Some fear Pebble's copper and other metals might migrate into the river water through wind-blown dust. Scientific studies show salmon navigation can be hampered by copper concentrations of only three or four parts per billion in the water.

However, as geochemist Chuck Hawley noted in a column published on this page in 2009, "the natural waters within the Pebble deposit area are several times that concentration already." Dust also must be controlled, under mining permit terms.

Still others fear a catastrophic collapse of Pebble's mine tailings dam or the long-term effects of acidic mine drainage.

Again, those challenges should be manageable. If they aren't, then, yes, the mine should not be built.

Strangely, the survey released last week found only "78.2 percent of registered voters in Alaska would choose renewable resources like salmon over non-renewable resources like copper."

That should be 100 percent. Given what we know about fish and minerals, we don't need to sacrifice one for the other. The evidence is all around us.

Read more: [Fairbanks Daily News-Miner - Unnecessary fear Experience shows mining fishing can be compatible](#)

Phillip North
Ecologist
Environmental Protection Agency
Kenai River Center
514 Funny River Road
Soldotna, Alaska 99669
(907) 714-2483
fax 260-5992
north.phil@epa.gov

"To protect your rivers, protect your mountains."